

***Words in Winter* talk at Trentham, August 19, 2018 by Dr Brigid Magner**

Over the last six years I have been researching a book about literary places associated with a bunch of notable Australian authors: Adam Lindsay Gordon, Henry Lawson, Joseph Furphy, Nan Chauncy, Eleanor Dark, Katharine Susannah Prichard, P.L. Travers, Kylie Tennant and HHR. These places, or sites, are characterised by commemorative practices, often involving things, or artefacts of various kinds. In this way, the places are entangled with the things that reside in them. In the places I study, meanings, activities and a specific landscape are all implicated and enfolded by each other', to borrow a phrase from the social geographer Edward Relph. (add footnote)

As Erika Doss argues in her book *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America* memorials can embody affective dimensions – the structures of public feeling – that characterize contemporary life'.¹ Many of the monuments and memorials I look at – for example the large number of statues of Henry Lawson - around 25 at last count - were produced during an earlier historical moment when monuments and notions of the monumental dominated public culture. These statues and monuments were built with a view to encouraging a passionate and consensual relationship with national identity.

In the Australian context, the rise of mass pilgrimage to sites associated with the 19C poet Adam Lindsay Gordon and Henry Lawson, contributed significantly to the formation of a self-referential national literature. These two figures received a great deal of posthumous commemorative attention, arguably at the expense of their contemporaries. Both Gordon and Lawson had unfortunate life stories, with Gordon suiciding on Brighton beach in 1870 and Lawson dying of alcoholism in Abbotsford in 1922. . Arguably it was precisely the tragic circumstances of their deaths, combined with their vivid writing, that compelled people to celebrate them in large numbers. Timing is important too – while Lawson was almost immediately accorded a State Funeral and received the honours that flowed from this, Gordon pilgrimages did not hit their peak till the 1920s, fifty years after his death. After the First World War

there was a desire for commemoration of literary figures who might speak to the trauma and loss experienced by returned soldiers and their families (although, it must be noted that the cult of Gordon was almost exclusively male). These figures were taken up by fans at this time, for personal reasons, but also to give them Australian icons to venerate. As my project has progressed, I have become increasingly interested in the literary figures who have been marginalized or left out of the national narrative altogether: women writers, indigenous writers, multicultural writers and expatriates.

Today I'll be talking specifically about HHR and the wider themes raised by her commemoration in Australia. As you will know, the HHR society began relatively recently, in 2008, as an offshoot of the Monash University project led by Clive Probyn and Bruce Steele, which produced many publications, both new editions and critical studies. This project certainly gave HHR's profile a boost, yet it's worth remembering that birthday celebrations for HHR have been happening annually since 1970 when *Lake View* her former home was bequeathed by Lily Salmon, refurbished and opened to the public, with National Trust listing.

One of the commemorative practices I talk about in my book is literary tourism, or the visiting of sites related to particular authors (which might also include a range of associated rituals). HHR herself engaged in literary tourism when she returned to Victoria in 1912 at the age of 42. This journey was a vital element of the research for *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*. During her tour around country Victoria, HHR wrote detailed notes on Chiltern and Maldon especially, which would reappear in her fiction as 'Barambogie' and 'Warrenega' respectively. *Ultima Thule*, the third volume of the trilogy, centres on Lake View, the house in Chiltern where the Richardson family spent eleven difficult months as HHR's father was dying from an unknown illness (possibly syphilis or vascular dementia).

At *Lake View* domestic features have been thoughtfully reconstructed with the addition of furnishings typical of the time and medical equipment approximating the instruments from Walter's medical surgery, including a gruesome-looking birthing

chair. Memorabilia such as articles, letters, photos and portraits are also displayed¹, reminding the visitor of HHR's successful career beyond Chiltern.

Although Chiltern was depicted as a site of great distress, Maldon was represented in *The Getting of Wisdom* and *Myself When Young* as a verdant place which had a healing effect, contributing to the development of the young novelist's creative powers.ⁱⁱ In 1883, when she was thirteen years old, HHR travelled from Maldon to Melbourne to attend Presbyterian ladies College as a boarder. This departure is mirrored by that of Laura Rambotham who leaves Warrenega to attend boarding school in Melbourne. In 2009, as part of a suite of HHR events in Maldon, there was a short play by Janey Runci called 'Her Daughter's Hair' at the Post Office, followed by a re-enactment of Laura's journey by Cobb & Co coach when she set off to school in Melbourne. The audience was invited to take the ride with Laura to the Castlemaine Road and were given printed material to identify the buildings mentioned in *The Getting of Wisdom*.

HHR used very specific details of Maldon in the first three chapters of *The Getting of Wisdom* which were used to depict Laura's departure which have subsequently been used to structure tours of Maldon. The illustrated booklet, *Henry Handel Richardson in Maldon* (2010), which won a Victorian History awardⁱⁱⁱ emerged from the first impulse to celebrate HHR in Maldon when a plaque was erected at the post office in the 1970s. The book contains three walks around the centre of Maldon, including a detailed map, and features sixteen heritage buildings; the cemetery and significant graves, and a guide to places fictionalised in HHR's *The Getting of Wisdom*. There is one walk that allows the tourist to imagine Maldon in the Richardson era. It encourages the walker to see Maldon from the perspective of the post office, HHR's former home. Starting at HHR's former home (the Post Office) the book guides the walker through sites of interest detailing their history and possible connections with the author and her work.²

Given HHR's references to the incredibly fertile gardens of Maldon, it seems appropriate that she was remembered through a Garden tour in 2011. HHR enthusiasts from Maldon organised a tour of eight private gardens concluding at the Anglican church Vicarage where HHR spent time as a girl. An afternoon tea was given afterwards in the garden at the post office where Mary Richardson, HHR's mother lived and worked as a postmistress. Although the garden is not as luscious as HHR remembered, and smaller after subdivision, it is still used by the family of the postmaster who continue to inhabit the house attached to the post-office (very uncommon in city post offices!)

Another re-enactment occurred at the Richardson's former home at 26 Mercer St, Queenscliff. The Richardsons were there in 1877 until Walter was hospitalised in mid 1878. Initiated by the Queenscliff Historical Society and written by Dorothy Johnston, this playlet was based on the troubled time when Mary was training to be a postmistress leaving the two little girls at home with their father who was become increasingly deranged. In *Myself When Young* she notes that Mary's absences 'bothered us...she had always been so to speak on tap. I fetched out my ball, and lost myself in story-making. Lil had no such refuge and lived in a constant state of nervous anxiety.' (*MWY*) The girls would have to go and find Walter and bring him home when he got lost – the source of much teasing from their contemporaries (at least in the fictionalized version of the story) In *Ultima Thule* other children would taunt Cuffy (who was based on Ettie) 'Who'd have a cranky doctor for a father?'

Of the playlet, Dorothy Johnston has said that she was trying to capture the 'true heart of darkness' in the Mercer St house. The cameo was followed by a reading from the final section of *Ultima Thule* which features Walter's death. Incidentally Johnston is also writing a crime novel called *Gerard Hardy's Misfortune* which features an HHR scholar being murdered in a basement, after trying to contact HHR through a séance.

The final town which has connections with HHR is Koroit where Mary took up post office duties, before moving to Maldon. It was here that he died a few months after

being released from the Yarra Bend Asylum at Mary's request. In 2017 the HHR Society organised a pilgrimage to Koroit to visit the Post Office and Walter's grave where there was a spirited reading of the final section of *Ultima Thule* (again!)

In my study of HHR commemoration in these four Victorian towns, I have been considering what effect HHR's fiction might have had on the construction and framing of the sites themselves – with any analysis of HHR there is an inevitable slippage at work between the 'real' and the imagined given that her *FRM* trilogy is thoroughly underpinned by the story of her family, particularly the travails of her father. It's fascinating to consider how HHR's fiction may have shaped the curation of these sites, especially the Chiltern house and the Maldon walks. Given that her memoir *Myself When Young* was unfinished and also quite unreliable, commemorators have relied on the fiction to fill the gaps.

The fact that tourist attractions in Maldon and Chiltern are partially based on unreliable recollections and fabrications is not so unusual, for literary heritage involves all kinds of approximation and simulation (think of the way that writers' houses are filled with furniture that wasn't theirs but suggests a certain era). Furthermore, the practice of literary tourism always involves a degree of fantasy, since our efforts to really 'know' an author by visiting sites associated will always be limited. In a recent article in the *London Review of Books* John Pemble argues that literary tourism is 'pointless and frustrating'. He says that it's 'typically defined...by nostalgic belatedness'. In other words, tourists always arrive after the writer has departed – they are always belated (although, in a few odd exceptions, people would visit when writers were still in residence as in the case of Thomas Hardy in Dorset)

I would argue – perhaps controversially - that the figure of the author might be seen as a constructed form that is assembled posthumously by their admirers.

If we apply this idea to HHR, what can the flurry of commemorations in the 2000s tell us about her meanings to Australians in this century? She has been remembered fairly consistently in Chiltern since the 1970s, due to the presence of *Lake View*, but

the other towns I have discussed were encouraged by members of the HHR society and their own historical societies to further explore HHR's connections. Certainly there has been a wider trend to write local histories including notable people, even if they only lived there fleetingly.

Another factor to consider in relation to HHR's former omission from local histories is her peripatetic childhood and her expatriate status. Expatriate Australian authors have traditionally been neglected due to their choice to live elsewhere. They were often seen as having turned their backs on the national project and were ignored or disparaged as a result. In addition, HHR wasn't one to mince words. As Nettie Palmer notes, HHR is 'extremely critical of her fellow-countrymen...She has spent her whole mature life in Europe, amid older cultures, at hand all that an older civilization can give. And she is too honest to pretend to find happiness and satisfaction where she does not feel it.'^{iv} This attitude to Australian culture did not endear her to the literary establishment, although she has had a few champions - like the Palmers - over the years.

Finally I'd like to return to the theme of loss that I mentioned in relation to Gordon and Lawson at the beginning. As Robert Shannon Peckham argues, heritage is necessarily linked to loss and disinheritance. Heritages, like folklores are 'born disappearing.' He goes on to say that 'heritage might be thought of as the preservation of a potential loss. We value things only if they are threatened or have gone.'^v In my work on literary places in Australia I have found that commemorations tend to signal loss, or the threat of it, rather than success. We might see HHR's life as a success, from the outside at least, but her most substantial work the *FRM* trilogy revolves around a man who might be characterised as a 'seeker' - who essentially fails to find what he is looking for - and is brought down by a combination of misfortune, poor judgement and illness. In the introduction to the Text Publishing edition of *FRM*, entitled 'no Success like Failure' Peter Craven observes:

Only Australia could have coughed up *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*. A doctor on the goldfields meets a girl and makes good. He thrives, he fails, he goes off his head. He brings all his bright hopes

crashing down around him because he has no capacity for practical life. Call that a national epic. No wonder we settled for the doggerel and the bushrangers.^{vi}

ⁱ Erika Doss, *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012: 19.

ⁱⁱ Maldon appears in various guises in four of HHR's works: *The Getting of Wisdom*, *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, *The End of a Childhood* and *Myself When Young*.

ⁱⁱⁱ The book won the Best/Walk Tour category of the annual Victorian Community History Awards. These awards, presented by the Royal History Society of Victoria, recognise the contribution made by Victorians to the preservation of Victoria's heritage.

^{iv} A note by Nettie Palmer in the papers of Vance and Nettie Palmer, MS 3942, National Library of Australia.

^v Robert Shannon Peckham, *Rethinking Heritage: Cultures and Politics in Europe* London: L.B. Tauris & Co, 2003: 7.

^{vi} Peter Craven, 'No Success like Failure' Introduction to the Text Publishing edition of *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* (2012).